

The Clapping Class

by Johannes Lievaart ESA Violin Teacher Trainer NETHERLANDS



Introduction

Many years ago I heard an American teacher explaining in a lecture the importance for young children of clapping the beat to pieces. Every person, contrary to animals, is born with the ability to feel the beat in music and developing this ability can be a great help in the early stages of learning to play an instrument.

I recognised the value of it. Children must be aware of the fact that the beat always goes on. Not as a fact, but they must learn to feel the beat. Think of rests, (Oh Come little Children) dotted rhythms (May Song) and longer notes (Minuet 1, Two Grenadiers). So I started the next September with an extra group lesson for beginners: The Clapping Class.

Over the years this has developed into a beginner's class with many more aspects and values for the children and which for me has become indispensable for beginners.

If you have a clapping class on each day you have group lessons for beginners, the new children will join a group that already knows what is expected. In this way children learn from one another.

Basically it is very simple: teacher, parents and children sit in a circle on the floor, the music of book one is played and we clap, walk, jump and make all sorts of movements, following the example of the teacher. A few rules are essential:

1. Children must feel absolutely free to join in or not. Many of my beginning students just sit on their parent's lap doing nothing while taking in important information.
2. There is no instruction how to perform the movements, let alone that these movements have to be correct. The children see what is expected and try to copy the teacher. The development of their motor skills can be very different and the best way to develop that is to let them free. If young children suddenly drop out, just let them. If you force them back in they will resist. It is crucial that parents understand this!
3. The Clapping Class is also open for young siblings of any age. Older children who have to be present because of a younger brother or sister are free to join in or not, as they wish.
4. The teacher maintains a strict form in which children are not allowed to walk around or do other funny things, while at the same time he/she keeps a happy

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and open atmosphere. This requires some experience. Allowing other things to happen during the class will destroy many of the good effects. The same applies to being too strict and demanding.

5. There are seldom as many parents as there are children. Some parents have two children, often one child brings two parents and observing teachers are also encouraged to join in. This is no problem.

Suzuki schools with different instruments taught can have one clapping lesson for all instruments, changing the music to another instrument weekly. This has very successfully been done in Waterloo, Canada.

Children usually continue to join the clapping class up to the end of book 1, depending on their age.

A clapping class takes 30 minutes.

What do children learn in the Clapping Class?

Whilst it just looks like a party which is fun to join, children pick up a lot during these lessons. The teacher must be aware of what he/she wants the children to confront with and the different levels of the children then try to accommodate for each level. It is an art to come up with very simple things that still appeal to the not so young students. It is also important to say as little as possible during the class. Sometimes we stop the music to explain something briefly, but most of the time the music of book 1 is played from beginning to end.

Here is a list of things children will pick up from the Clapping Class

- Listening. We ask parents to play the cd every day, but children are not asked to sit still and listen attentively. Their attention will come automatically when you do something - react to the music.
For a long time I omitted Etude and Gossec Gavotte, because I thought them too dull and too long for the clapping class. Then I discovered that all of my students experienced difficulties learning those two pieces, a fact which soon disappeared when I included them in the clapping class. Now Gossec is always the grand finale.
- Feeling the beat. The original idea still holds. We can also clap the rhythm of the pieces, but this is not necessary and can take attention from the beat.
- Joining a group. For most children this is the first time in their life to join a group and do something together. We have to be aware of this when we see children not knowing how to behave or showing evasive behaviour.
- Follow a leader. As we know from our group lessons the youngest children find it very difficult to follow the teacher and therefore try to copy their neighbour. The clapping class is a place to start to learn this, without the difficulties of playing the violin at the same time.
- Understanding the character of the music. In our movements we can reflect the character of the music and children like that very much.
- Learning accents. Apart from the beat it is good to stress accents. Children who have followed the clapping class have fewer difficulties with the difference between Allegretto and Andantino.
- Developing motor skills. There are certain rules about at which age children must be able to do specific things. But there are big differences between children. The clapping class is a good vehicle to observe and to help the children without giving any instruction. Teachers and parents must be aware of limitation by age: jumping on two feet simultaneously, skipping, crossing the

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middle line etc. Without specialist knowledge it may be sufficient to observe the children carefully.

Some children are a little awkward and or stiff in their movements. That will definitely have an influence on their learning the instrument. Sometimes we can stimulate more freedom in movement by clapping together.

When the teacher feels the child's tension it may give her/him information to what to incorporate for the next individual lesson.

As mentioned before, adding brain gym movements can make the clapping class having an even greater impact.

What movements do we do?

Basically all movements are allowed as long as the children enjoy it. Too difficult and too simple things will soon lead to distraction. Variety is important. We also have to find out which movements are effective and which are just fun. This requires some experience, but while the teacher is learning nothing really can go wrong.

Here are a few examples of what I do in my lessons, but in most lessons I invent new actions. The possibilities are endless.

- Clapping in many ways
- Simple body percussion
- Clapping together
- Walking (walking on the beat is difficult for small children)
- Funny walks
- Jumping
- Stamping
- Boxing
- Pretending throwing or bouncing a ball (The real throwing and bouncing on the beat is for later stages in the child's development. Dalcroze teachers have a great variety of these games)
- "Butterflying". Shaking both forearms quickly, hands in the air to mimic butterflies. This can be done to variation E and the doubles of Perpetual Motion and Etude. (Preparation to vibrato and sautillé!!)
- Pretending playing a drum, a piano or even the violin.
- Holding hands and walking in a circle. Change direction at the following phrase.

Other games

- Start walking freely through the room (not on the beat!) and finish at the last note of the piece the same place where you started.
- Stand up or sit down when the next phrase starts (not for beginners)
- Pass on an object from one to another (preferably on the beat)
- Sometimes we all close our eyes and just listen.

Body percussion and brain gym

For those who work with body percussion and brain gym with their students, you can start to do simple things during the clapping class. Remember that there are huge differences in what young children can do and prevent frustrations by keeping it short.

Some ideas for pieces of Book one

101A Always start with very simple clapping on the beat. I start the music before the children and parents sit in the circle and as soon as they hear the music they come to the circle. Usually before the middle of the variation everybody sits in the circle and the children always first.

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101B-E Depending on how experienced the children are, you can add other movements. Keep it generally simple, but if you have a number of older children, make one variation quite difficult.

103 Stand still and clap (or jump) on the retake. It is nice to see how quick children can do this except the retake in bar 10 (off the beat). Don't explain, they will discover in the end.

105 stand in a circle, holding hands. Walk in the circle during the first phrase, out during the second, in and out again on the third and the fourth. Then the second time everyone faces outward and we do the same movements.

108 Jump with two feet on the beat. It will result in a happy Allegro played later on. For line three stand still and wave your arms (different mood) and start exactly on the beat after the pause.

109A A good piece for teaching different speeds of counting. Start counting eighth notes (hands on upper legs - clap), 2nd phrase quarter notes, 3rd phrase half notes and 4th phrase whole notes.

109B Then for the doubles turn to "butterflying" while walking around (and finish on the last note the same place where you started!)

110 Stress the notes on the beat (last note of every group of three) by clapping, heavily walking, or whatever you can think of.

111 The same, this time on the first note of every three. I like to do a pretend boxing in pairs (parent child). It is forbidden to really touch one another. The adults have to watch with which hand the child starts and then use the same hand. In the middle section wave your hands, again to indicate the change of character.

112 See 109.

This is also a good piece to clap one tempo and add dynamics and accents on the high notes.

113-114-115 See below

117 The grand finale. Invent what you like but do let it not run out of hand. We usually start to lift the children up while dancing and throwing them up in the air at the grace notes. At each double bar we change to something else and the last section of the trio we skip. Very young children can't yet skip and parents haven't done it for ages. So this is great fun. At the very end we all fall down on the floor. Time for a drink.

The Minuets

Three quarter bars are more difficult than even bars. You can clap the first beat on the upper legs and the others normally.

I like to introduce here a social aspect. Parents sit on their knees in a circle while the children stand in an inner circle, each close to and facing his/her parent. Before we start I ask which child wants to help me and that child stands in front of me. On the first beat parent and child clap with both hands to one another and the other two beats everyone claps for himself. It is great to see how young children try to cope with this, how they develop and how quickly or slowly this happens. Don't try to help them to get it right, it is not yet a violin lesson, only do it right yourself and let them find out.

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When I blow my whistle each child has to move to the next parent. Of course there are children who don't want or dare to move to someone else. They can walk around their parent and stay where they are. The child that should go to this parent has to skip one place.

The clapping possibilities for the minuets are endless. For the younger ones you have to stay within the simplest form, but soon we can introduce clapping together with one hand on the fist beat, alternatively left and right. We can clap only on the first beat (easy) or only the second and third beat (much more difficult) and then we can add all sorts of variations. I teach parents to choose for each child keeping the simplest form for those who need it and more advanced ones for those who need the challenge.

Social sides of the Clapping Class

The clapping class has many advantages. As we know all learning should be offered as playing and this is the ultimate form of that. When prospective parents and children come to observe they are always invited to join in and they love to do that. Who does not want to join the party? After the clapping class they will of course observe the following real group lessons.

It is important that parents and children can join in with something while still in the observing period.

Not only children like to join. Reluctant parents who come to observe my lessons are immediately taken by it and hooked for Suzuki violin lessons.

What does the teacher learn?

For the teacher there is a great deal to learn. We teach our parents to observe their children carefully but this is also the moment for the teacher to observe. How does everybody react (parents included). Observe each child personally, especially when doing the walking around during the minuets. Look each child that comes before you in the eyes and see how they feel, how they move, how they enjoy themselves. You can encourage them with your own movements (harder - softer - simpler - more challenging - in a funny way). Do whatever you feel is right for the child.

During the clapping class you may discover why some twinklers have difficulties in learning the basic techniques. It does not always give you the solution but understanding the difficulties can be the beginning of a solution.